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Composition - GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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SHARPENING THE PROCESS. ON MUSICAL COMPOSITION - INTERACTION, COMMUNICATION, METHODS (2003).



Some personal reflections by Carl Bergstrøm-Nielsen, composer and improvisor.

The text to follow was conceived of as some notes for my own purposes while reflecting on my own work over the years, but I also realised it would be exciting to speak out and discuss these matters with colleagues outside of the norms of scientific papers. It deals with composition as a way of sharpening the playing process and of intensifying communication between players, rather than prescribing details. It is presupposed that motivated and adequately trained players are available. If this is not the case, a less radical but maybe still very useful form of composition is possible, which for pragmatic and educational reasons employ a larger amount of things written out, without departing from the basic principles.

The article was sent out, but only very few comments came back. I guess it might be too theoretical and long for most composer colleagues, but do surprise me with a [comment](#) if you feel like!

INSPIRATIONS

Vinko Globokar spoke about the composer who "manipulates people in the way he used to manipulate notes" (Man improvisiert... Bitte, improvisieren Sie!...Komm, lasst uns improvisieren!..." Melos 2, 1972). And he designed what could be seen as a continuum of roles musicians could have as a reaction to another player, from accompanying, doing something similar to doing the opposite thing (whatever that might be in his/her interpretation..). (Réagir, 1970, soon to appear in English translation on my website). Interestingly and importantly, such categories parallel classic notions like imitation, thematic variation and contrast. (One could maybe also compare it to the newer dodecaphonic ones of transposition, mirroring and reversing - here, contrasts are also closely related to

each other). Contrast is so to speak derived from identity, and this might be a principle valid for much classical music which became later upset by Cage ideas. Well, but don't forget that in some of his most important works like Piano Concert (1958) and the Variations series (1958ff) he employed utterly systematic and concentrated formula-like organising principles to make this happen. The point here is, diversity can be viewed from a logical viewpoint. This seems less relevant (and yet...?) for free improvisation, but certainly relevant for compositional designs which yet refrain from fixing the outcome.

Another very important inspiration for me is the pieces by Chr. Wolff with cues, like Duet II (1961) or For 1, 2 or 3 people (1964). Here, it seems that the composer does away with sequentiality. It's a play, a game with rules, and players' reactions, also within very short spans of time, can determine what comes next. Music has been lifted out of the millenium-old notion of "movement writing" (German: "Satz"). These ideas also inspired John Zorn to his so-called "game pieces" which became a cult phenomenon during the eighties - the number of CDs out with unabridged versions of "Cobra" still testify to this.

METHODS

Composition abandoning "movement writing" for something depending much more on interaction is of course a wide field. We are still at the stage in which it is highly needed to discover that this is really the case and highly needed to work out practical examples.

I'd like here to outline some important working fields of mine right now. The wildly intriguing thing about them for me is that I can pursue things which happened during free (or other) improvisation - make compositional designs highlighting what seems to be the syntax of free playing. It is exciting because it seems to stimulate our playing and allows me and fellow players to go deeper into similar, but new experiences - both within my usual group and for/with others. It's a formalising that allows for a sharpening of the processes. - Both the categories and the descriptions here should of course just be seen as examples, not as exhaustive in any way, and of course also mixed forms exist.

GENERAL FEEDBACK PROCESSES

Some of my pieces deal with the individual players' critical awareness to the total sound, and various reaction possibilities towards it are prescribed. This is the case for instance with this (even if the "centre" can be interpreted subjectively):

TOWARDS A CENTRE (1977)

Imagine a geometrical centre in the total sound, regardless of what is played.

Concentrate from time to time all your energy on aiming directly at this centre, for shorter or longer periods of time.

- and in a concrete way with many of my IF-THEN pieces, for instance:

IF - THEN IX (1991)

To Intuitive Music Group.

If that which you hear is

acceptable

interesting

inviting you to participate

THEN

participate and make a suitable amount of pause.

If not

THEN

take a pause for a while

or (alternate freely)

comment the others' playing by means of what you play (for instance, it is allowed to make fun of others' playing, be aggressive,

insist on having an answer).

Some of my IF-THEN pieces deal rather with the awareness fluctuation process going on inside the individual. This is crucial to playing - something must come from "inside", that is, imagination feeling, motivation, and there must also be an attention towards the other players' contributions and the total sound. These tasks demand very different forms of awareness. Awareness cannot focus at more than one thing at a time - so it's necessarily a fluctuation. (As was stated in a "flight lesson" in a computer flight simulator: "scan instruments regularly". That's really how we function inside!)

IF - THEN IV (1979)

If you think the music is complicated

concentrate on the feeling with your instrument

If you think the music is simple

concentrate on listening into all possible details.

IF - THEN VII (1988)

Start:

IF for the present you have become satisfied from listening, THEN express your emotions right now.

IF you have expressed yourself - THEN take a pause and contemplate an idea about how you would like to play and afterwards put the idea into practise.

IF your idea have been put into practise - THEN take a pause listening to the sounds right now (minimum fifteen seconds).

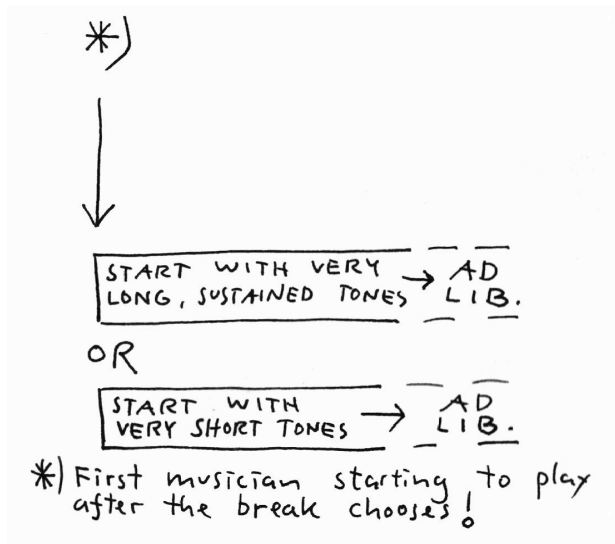
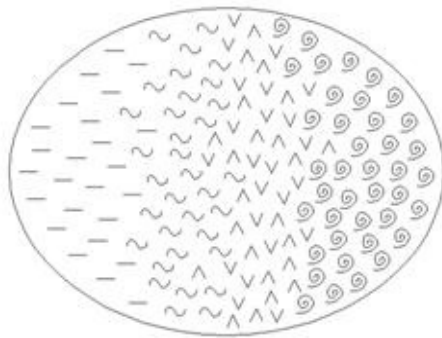
(go to start again, etc.)

IF-THEN VII was directly inspired by awareness categories from gestalt therapy.

COLLECTIVE DECISIONS

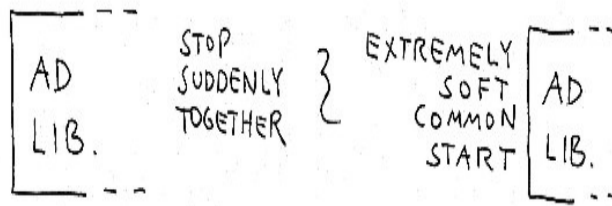
It seems that in order that a decision can be made, there must be alternatives to choose from. This is eminently a composer's task.

Some pieces of mine employ the "picnic principle", and it is widely used in the form of composition taught by me at Aalborg University. One piece of mine exemplifying this is "A carpet is created" (1992):



It is interesting also to provoke fast decisions. Frameworks 6 attempts to do so, by letting the kind of last element depend on the first musician beginning. It will be necessary to be well aware what's happening and to adjust.

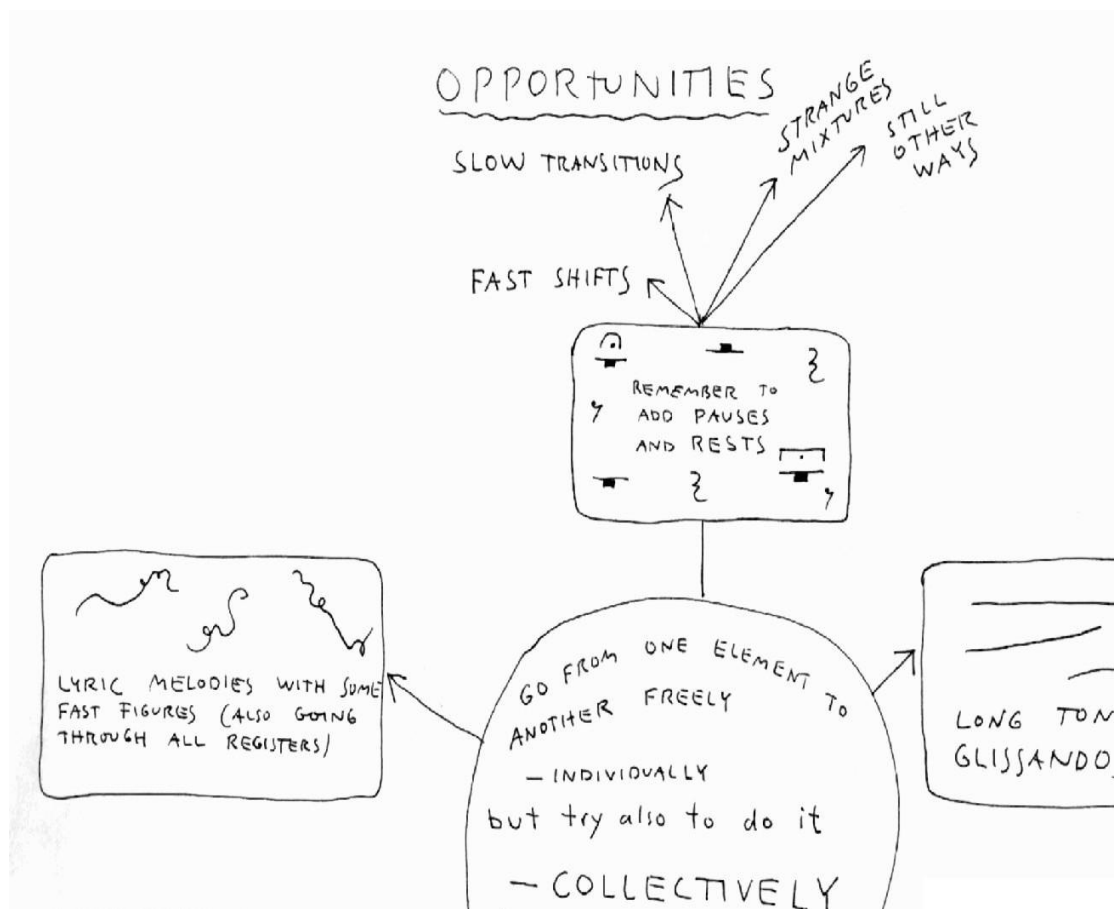
To demand players to "end with" some specific material might entail a slow process with testing out, waiting for each other, waiting till the moment seems right. On the other hand, as can be experienced in improvised playing, the right moment to stop can present itself very suddenly, and reacting on this has to be fast (Frameworks 3, 2000/01, excerpt):



"SPONTANEOUS AGREEMENT"

This phenomenon, coming from a collective association process, is well known from everyday life. During conversation themes brought up may liven up memories and thoughts in us which we would then like to subsequently throw into the conversation. This is a relative slow-working process. Telling jokes often illustrates well the intensification of feeling and memory connected to the process. A much faster version of this is in play during exchange of non-verbal expressions: think of laughter, for instance, how it can spread explosively within a group like fire. Or a congregation's comments to something proposed from a speaker.

These are also situations eminently connected to improvised music, in my view. To provoke them, I have prescribed many and clear shifts in the piece *SHIFTS* (2001) as an indirect strategy. A more direct one (and till now the most successful) used in *OPPORTUNITIES* (2000)



has been to prescribe a choice between 4 different, clear-cut categories, like major triadic figures, curled melodies and more, and encouraging shifts between them as well as the awareness of maybe doing it collectively. "Maybe" is important - collective agreement because one has to do it is not the point here, but to be open to possibilities for it to happen. Even if it just takes place partially, it could be good, and polyphonic dealing with contrasting elements could be OK in itself.

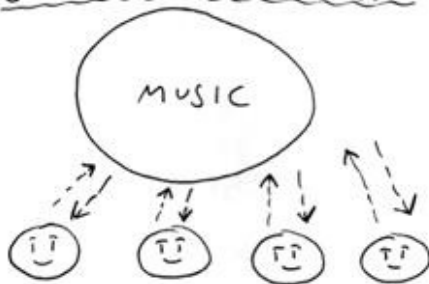
OVERVIEW SO FAR

<i>METHOD</i>	<i>MAIN LINE OF COMMUNICATION</i>	<i>CO-ORDINATION</i>	<i>SPEED</i>	<i>TIME SPAN</i>
GENERAL FEEDBACK PROCESSES	BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND MUSIC	NO	INDIVIDUAL	THE WHOLE PROCESS
COLLECTIVE	BETWEEN	YES	FAST TO	SHORT

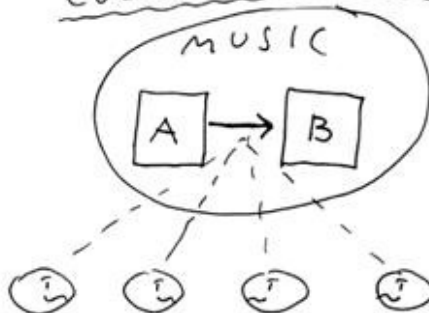
DECISIONS	INDIVIDUAL AND MUSIC		SLOW	TO MEDIUM
SPONTANEOUS AGREEMENT	BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS	YES	VERY FAST TO MODERATE	VERY SHORT TO

And with a graphical sketch...

GENERAL FEEDBACK PROCESSES:



COLLECTIVE DECISIONS:



SPONTANEOUS AGREEMENT:



TO BE DISCUSSED

Who of you is also working on similar things and how ?

THE GLORIES OF MUSICAL NOTATION VIEWED AS A TOOL FOR MUSIC CREATION AND SHARING

The eye can overview large entities of graphic symbols, whereas the ear is bound to real time. Exactly by abstracting from real time it becomes possible to highlight structures, to test out different ones, to see them in perspective.

Notation also permits to memorise what happened (it's faster to look at a sketch than listen to a recording), and it permits interchange between musicians' ideas. It allows for a reflection process which can build up structures that can reach high levels of meaning and artistic value. And it allows for building up shared knowledge much beyond the individual group of players. Individual ideas can be put into clearer forms and be part of a larger world, of a common culture.

THE DRAWBACKS OF MUSICAL NOTATION VIEWED AS TEXT

The world is full of composers with individual visions. We need something else than isolated visions, something more collaborative and a new understanding of this. Most of those visionaries would content that their visions certainly are there to be shared. Almost any composer feels dependent on good performances and would also think that "good performance" depends on motivation and engagement from the performers. Composers thus depend crucially on communication and co-creation even when they do not analyse what makes the communication. However, this dimension can and should indeed be analysed - and definitely not least from a compositional viewpoint.

Imagine a big, relevant insight suddenly being communicated to you when being very open, motivated and maybe even searching for it. While life certainly contains such moments, it is also true that in turn many or all of us might communicate good ideas to each other in different fields, usually having no surprise in mind, but just revealing our thoughts. Also, insights might take a long time to become ripe, and this ripening process involves other people, be it in practical experience or conversation or both. In short, life is full of mutual exchange and sharing, and this could indicate for the composer that fixing him or herself to a guru role and performers to being assistants might not be the only possible way to creatively practise music, maybe it is not the most

appropriate either and it may perhaps not be the best and most effective way to push ideas and visions forward in the last end.

A big practical obstacle for letting such natural flow processes unfold in the artistic field of music creating is the notion of music as a text. Please note that by this I do NOT mean music as written formulas or frames to which I attribute an important role. I'm certainly for, not against conceptualising and writing some of the time. The alternative to rigid composition is not only free improvisation, it is also a new form of non-rigid composition. What I am against is the assumption that the most important form of music-making consists in one person writing it down like a speech and then having it reproduced note by note. A certain neutrality and monotony in performance is bound to result in most cases, like in the reading of TV News, even if the performer tries to do his or her best and understand the composer's idea. If this is not so apparent with classical works, it could be due to their highly repeated practise which lends the performance a more organic character.

Let me take attention to some philosophers who certainly did not seem to believe truth was to be found in text but in dialogue: Socrate believed in ongoing questioning and dialogue. Hegel, while putting up the nice formula of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, made truth relative exactly by this, a thing to be found in the process. Danish Grundtvig coined the concept of the "living word" by which he meant the way in which concepts are reflected upon and passed on in everyday life, and he was highly influential as a pioneer of our free high school system.

The "text" mode of composition must be dissolved into something else: formulas is the concept first coming to me. Clear like mathematics and beautiful like the solution to a problem. Another comparison could be made: getting detailed instructions about each task to do as an employee is like performing a text. Being responsible on your own to do the task in your own way could be like performing an open composition. Most of us prefer this way in our working life, I suspect.

Clearly, sociological aspects of the rigidity problem also exist and should be addressed, too. But that's another matter. Practical efforts from the composers are important and this is the issue here.
